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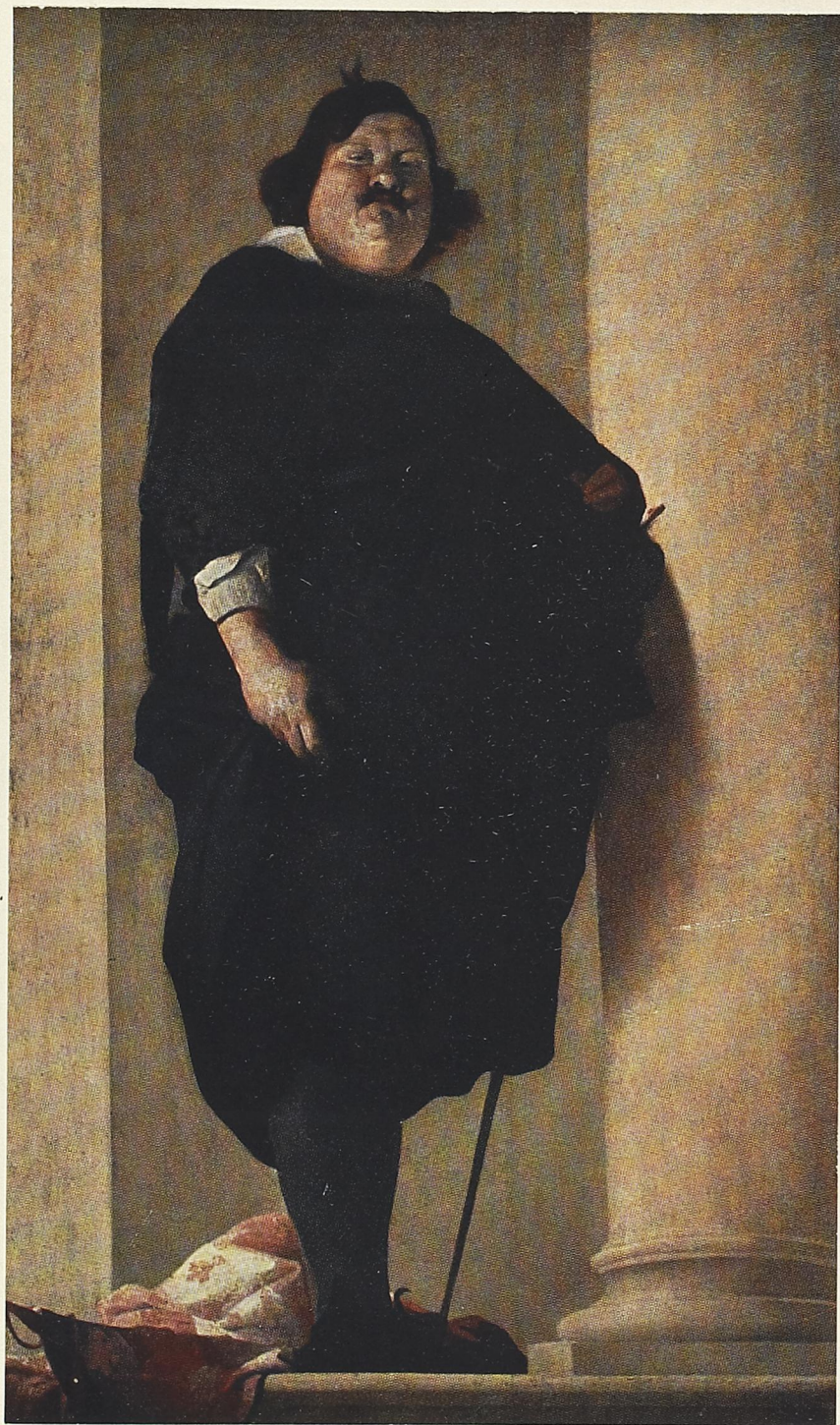
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ALESSANDRO DEL BORRO

Royal Museum, Berlin

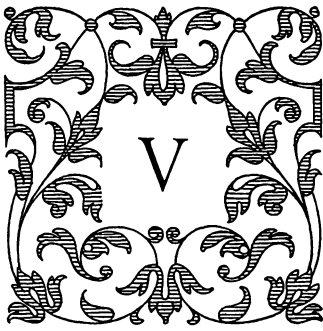
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THE INDIVIDUALISM OF VELASQUEZ



VELASQUEZ, a name to conjure with, is the maternal family name of the great painter. His father was Juan Rodriguez de Silva, who married Geronima Velasquez. The painter's full name, coupling, Spanish fashion, the family names of both parents with a "y" (Spanish for "and"), was Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velasquez; but he abbreviated it in his signature to Diego de Silva Velasquez; and, as an artist, is known entirely by his mother's name. He lived 1599-1660.

And since the name is one to conjure with, being one of the greatest in art, it is a pleasure to realize that at least three of his most important works are in this country. These are the portrait of Philip IV. of Spain, in the collection of Mr. Henry C. Frick; the portrait of the same king, in the Altman collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and the portrait of the Duke of Olivarez, in the Huntington collection. In less critical days than these, much of the work of the painter's son-in-law, Mazo, was attributed to Velasquez. Now, however, especially owing to the expertises

of Senor Beruete, the first expert to specialize in Velasquez, the list of authentic pictures by the great master has been curtailed to but little more than a hundred.

Since Velasquez's career as a painter lasted about forty years, it seems as if in the course of it he might easily have produced more than these hundred or so of authentic works that are at present attributed to him. Nevertheless, as stated, the tendency of modern criticism is to diminish rather than to increase the list of his achievements. The discovery of fresh examples of his work is altogether disproportionate to the eagerness with which pictures by him are sought for—an eagerness amusingly illustrated by the experience of the director of the National Portrait Gallery, to whom the lost portrait sketch of Prince Charles, of England, painted by Velasquez in Madrid, in 1622, is offered on an average of once a week. The ransom of a Velasquez, when authenticated beyond the shadow of a doubt, is a fortune. Yet the list decreases rather than grows. For example, the familiar portrait of Alessandro del Borro, at Berlin, which figured without comment in the catalogue appended to a volume on Velasquez

published so recently as 1910, is now removed from the Spanish room at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, and hung with contemporary Italian paintings. Among several pictures put forward as "discoveries" at the exhibition of Spanish Old Masters at the Grafton galleries, London, only one (Mr. Otto Beit's "Kitchen-maid") appears now to be considered the work of the master himself.

What was the reason for this exceptionally limited *œuvre*? The answer is that Velasquez practically had a clientèle of but one person. From the time when he left his master's studio to enter the service of Philip IV., of Spain, we find that all but a bare percentage of his work was commissioned by the King, and we need not doubt that the royal permission had to be obtained for any other, just as he was obliged to secure it for his two journeys to Italy. The greatest wonder is that under such restraint he should have preserved wholly inviolate his artistic independence. Even if his choice of subject was restricted, his method of dealing with it was absolutely his own, and the obvious truth of all that he put on to canvas, if it is but the least of the qualities that have made him famous, is not the less remarkable. If one had to sum up his career and his art in a sentence it might be done by describing him as a court painter who never flattered.

As an artist Velasquez never permitted himself to be swayed by outside influences. From his earliest years in Seville (his birthplace) the boy had an inclination towards painting. At the age of thirteen already his parents put him to study under the most considerable painter then in Spain, Francisco

de Herrera. A few months later, because of this master's bad temper, they took their son away from him and placed him with a more sympathetic instructor, Francisco Pacheco. This was a most fortunate change, for whereas Herrera was deficient in character as well as in temper, Pacheco was a singularly charming man, and his house was the resort of the many literary and artistic people who at that time were to be found in Seville. His good influence on Velasquez extended far beyond the teaching of his art, for he appears to have brought him up as one of his own family, and within five years he bestowed on him the hand of his daughter Juana, "induced thereto," to quote Pacheco's own words, "by the rectitude of his conduct, the purity of his morals and his great talents, and from the high expectation I entertained of his natural abilities and transcendent genius." Indeed, it has been wittily said of Pacheco that his finest piece of work was his son-in-law.

To what extent was Velasquez influenced by the great artists who were his contemporaries? To no extent whatever. He appears to have worked entirely in independence of them. Nothing could be simpler than the elements of his compositions, and there is nowhere an apparent attempt at making a picture out of them. It is what we might have expected to see upon looking through the keyhole of a door at any odd moment when we happened to be passing, or if we had chanced to be present at an event like the surrender of Breda ("The Lances"), or in a chamber of the palace observing the dwarfs maintained for the amusement of the court ladies in waiting, or the tapestry weavers—all subjects of famous Velasquez paint-

ings. This very simplicity we shall find, throughout the whole course of the painter's career, to be the secret of his extraordinary power. Realizing, as it seems, his wonderful gift for seeing things as they were, and for painting them as he saw them, he seldom if ever put on canvas anything which was not actually before him.

Yet the elaborate realism of the Dutch painters of still-life or interiors has absolutely nothing in common with this perfect simplicity of Velasquez. To get their effects they had to heap the tables with fish and fruit, or crowd the room with people who must all be doing something in particular. Velasquez—to quote Randall Davies—seems to have just dropped in and painted whatever was going on. From the very first he seems to have struck out this path for himself—the path of realism—and his master, so far from discouraging him, was more than content to foster and develop so far as he could the extraordinary talent which he recognized in his pupil. It was on the simple imitation of natural objects, and on portraiture, that his talents were exercised and developed. There was a peasant lad, Pacheco says, whom the young Velasquez used to sketch continually, in all sorts of poses, in charcoal heightened with white, a practice which later helped him to attain truth to life in painting portraits.

How wholly independent Velasquez was of others is shown by his remaining entirely uninfluenced by Rubens during that great painter's sojourn in Madrid, where Velasquez had been attached to the court of Philip IV. since 1623. It was in the summer of 1623 that Rubens visited Madrid, as the repre-

sentative of King Charles, charged with a diplomatic commission concerning the conclusion of peace between England and Spain. But though he came as an ambassador, he brought with him no less than eight pictures, and during the nine months he remained he painted a great many more. These, included five portraits of the King, besides numerous portraits of people about the court, and copies of the principal pictures of Titian which were in the palace.

Velasquez was charged by Philip to entertain Rubens, and show him all the treasures which the palace contained. The Flemish painter was then over fifty years old, his reputation as a person of importance was hardly less than that as an artist, and if Velasquez, who was then barely thirty years old, had been capable of being influenced by anyone it would surely have been by Rubens at the height of his fame and powers. But what do we find? Certainly nothing in his work that would suggest the remotest connection with the Flemish painter; and but for the knowledge of the fact that Rubens actually was in Madrid, and closely associated with Velasquez, one might naturally assume that the two had never met, and that Rubens was the last person in the world whose works could have had any influence on the painter of Philip IV. and his dwarfs, or of subjects like "Las Meninas" and "Las Hilanderas."

There is more than this, however, to show that Velasquez was utterly insensible to the influence of Rubens. Velasquez's last picture of this period, which was painted in the year 1629, may almost be taken as a challenge to Rubens. It is "The Topers," or as it was then called

"Bacchus;" a subject such as Rubens might have revelled in, a fact that must have been well known to the Spanish artist and might have brought him, even if unconsciously, within the magic circle of the Fleming's great gifts. Yet were we to compare the result of this deliberate choice of one of Rubens' own subjects, painted by Velasquez at the very time Rubens was in Madrid, or at most a month or two after his departure—if, for example we had "The Topers" hanging side by side with the "Silenus"—we should see at a glance how entirely independent of any Flemish influence Velasquez proved himself to be. The realism of Rubens extends no further than the marvellous rendering of human flesh. His characters are not real, but are embodiments of the pagan idea which underlies the subject, whereas the realism of Velasquez is real realism. The god is present, but he is obviously a human being, and as for the toppers, they are simply life-like portraits of beggars and loafers. It is quite right to call the picture after them, and not after Bacchus. There is nothing pagan about the composition. It is simply a group of real life.

How little influence Rubens had on Velasquez is further seen in the rendering by the latter of "The Boar Hunt."

Anything less reminiscent of a boar hunt by Rubens or Snyders it would be difficult to imagine. Velasquez was so thoroughly a realist that he never seems to have arrived at any facility in painting animals in motion or action. He had to paint something that he could actually see the whole time he was painting it.

Nor was he influenced by the painters he met or the works he copied during his two visits to Italy, from the first of which he returned to Madrid in 1631. In Venice he made copies from Tintoretto. Yet in his picture painted in Rome, "The Forge of Vulcan," do we find a trace of Italian influence? Instead, we have again a mythological subject in which we find that only a single figure is treated with some semblance of pagan attributes, while the rest are the most realistic presentments of the lower order of men in their actual every-day conditions. As it is, a laurel wreath, a loose robe and a radiant halo of light serve but thinly to disguise the human traits of the young Apollo, who recites the story of the infidelities of Venus to a Vulcan who is in no way distinguishable from the three nearly nude assistants, who are working with him at the anvil.